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Visual Narratives: Storytelling in the Digital Age

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by

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Abstract:

This research will identify the components of visual narratives in 2D and 3D animated films and their relation to elements in literature and other earlier forms of storytelling. Over the course of 150 years animation has evolved from phenakistoscopes and flips books to full length feature films. Today, stories need not be grounded by realities in order to be told visually, as in theater. Specialized artists and programmers can create and modify every aspect of environments and characters in order to convey a story most effectively. However, the act of transforming an idea into computer data and later to a visual narrative that will move audiences is extremely complex and involves more psychology than one would expect of a cartoon. Animating artists must understand how the elements of art, particularly shape and color, draw out specific emotional responses from viewers; much like an author must know the precise adjective to guide their readers through their tale. By delving into the specifics of these elements, this research seeks to broaden the understanding and appreciation of visual narratives in animated film as a significant form of modern storytelling.

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I. Introduction: Animation as Visual Storytelling

3D animation is a popular film genre and a readily accepted form of entertainment by today's audience, but it is not generally viewed as storytelling in the literary sense. This is because animated films, and film in general, are primarily a visual experience, meant to be viewed, not read. However, this paper will discuss how the adept use of shape and color in character and environment design allows 2D and 3D animators to tell stories in the form of visual narratives, which transforms animated films into the modern equivalent of classic storytelling.

To start off, let us quickly reflect on the similarities and differences between written stories and those portrayed digitally. The skeletal structures of literature and any film genre are very much the same. Like traditional narratives, film begins with an idea that is then transferred to writing on paper, a script in this case. Such a script must be solid in order to support all of the visual elements that will be added later. As David Ebert writes, "...a successful animation is only as good as its story, premise or content" (84).

Although they begin similarly, the end product of visual and written narrative are vastly different. Since the advent of writing systems and increase of literacy, storytelling has shifted from the dramatic oral presentation of the bard to a much more personal, individual affair that the reader experiences in silence. On occasion, when a story is read aloud, the experience can be shared to some extent with a group. However, in the end, it is up to the imagination of the individual reader or listener to determine the exact imagery of a story.

In contrast, films provide all viewers with the exact same imagery (although personal emotional reaction may differ). Whether they are viewed with a large audience in a cinema, or individually at home, the films being watched are identical, and therefore the action of watching them becomes a shared event. In this sense, film is a group experience. It is this variation between individual and group experience that separate the written and visual narrative forms. In today's society, the individual experience is seen as more sacred and significant than that of a shared experience, especially in matters of art.

American artist and scientist, Donna Cox, states in her article "Caricature, Readymades and Metamorphosis" that "The idea that art for the masses is low art relegates most Hollywood filmmaking and television production to this category" (349). This idea of low art that Cox discusses prevents film from being accepted as a form of narrative on par with literature.

3D animated movies in particular are viewed as inferior even within the realm of film due to the fact that they are generally made for younger audiences and are therefore perceived as juvenile. In general, animated films are viewed as simple cartoons for the entertainment of children. Although appreciation for animation within the film community has increased over the years, as can be seen in the establishment of an academy award for animated feature film in 2001, animated films are not really seen as serious filmmaking.

Film is also viewed as a lower art form due to how closely it's linked to the commercial Hollywood money-making machine. A movie that does well at the box office is considered popular, but its artistic and narrative value seems to depreciate, as financial gain appears to become the sole goal of the film's creators. This idea is especially applied to animated films. Disney, Pixar, and DreamWorks films in particular score very high at the box office, and although viewers enjoy the virtual spectacles that animated films provide, they are also seen as

easy money making films. Alan Ackerman explains in his book, *Seeing Things: From Shakespeare to Pixar*, how animators are quick to invent and employ the latest animation technology and effects, such as the new "3D fad", where films are animated specifically to be viewed with 3D glasses, which is marketed as making viewers feel like they are in the movie. (117) However, this just makes the animated film genre seem gimmicky as well as juvenile. This view hardly encourages audiences to appreciate animation as form of quality storytelling.

Yet, if viewers were to study animated films more closely, the depth and value of the visual storytelling would become more apparent. This is a task easier said than done, however, as such an act requires one to peel back the layers of special effects and technologies to study the characters and environments that that form the heart of the story. Ed Tan writes that a when a film truly moves viewers emotionally, "the nature and intensity of that interest are such that one is tempted to speculate on the mechanisms behind the phenomenon" (*Emotion and the Structure of Narrative Film,* 85).

When viewers do observe the building blocks that make up a quality work of film, the amount of time and effort that goes into telling a visual narrative becomes apparent. John Golden explains his own experience of understanding visual narratives in his article, "Literature into Film (and Back Again)". He writes, "I used to be so enamored of cinematic technique that I ignored other significant elements of film, including the theatrical elements…such as costumes, props, sets, lighting, and acting choice" (25). These theatrical elements are extremely important in visual story-telling, and by recognizing them, one can better appreciate a film as a whole.

Unlike live action film, where many of these theatrical elements can only be controlled to an extent, animated films have total control over everything, from the exact position of every

tree in a forest to every thread in a costume. Such creative power provides endless options and possibilities, which also requires huge amounts of precise decision-making. Animators must recognize how visual elements work together to best portray the plot, and, in doing so, provide effective storytelling.

II. Analysis: Visual Elements in Animation

The visual elements in animation can be sorted into the same categories as artistic elements. These categories include: shape, color, line, value, texture, space, and form. Out of these factors, shape and color are the most influential as far as controlling and directing the mood of the story, and will be the focus of this research. Combined together, the elements form a visual narrative. But how can animators unite these seemingly obscure parts in such a seamless fashion that they tell a story, as in the case of Pixar's award-winning *Finding Nemo* (2003)? Although the idea seems quite perplexing, once can gain a better understanding by closely examining the properties and effects of visual elements like shape and color.

Shape:

By observing shapes in film, one can quickly determine that the term "shape" does not simply include circles, triangles, squares, and rectangles, but is comprised of infinite diverse forms. And each of these individual shapes has a unique personality that in turn draws out a specific emotional response from viewers. Alex Simpson and Bernd Schmitt explain in their book, *Marketing Aesthetics: The Strategic Management of Brands, Identity, and Image,* how studying the many features of a shape can help determine its personality, and therefore the emotional reaction it will likely produce. They have established four general "dimensions" of

shape: angularity, symmetry, size, and proportion. Shapes may exhibit any combinations of these characteristics, and Simpson and Schmitt explain that "tinkering with these dimensions can have a dramatic impact on [viewer's] perceptions" (89). The acts of altering and arranging shapes can both be influential, and doing so can change the feeling of a shape and the story it tells.

Therefore, when shapes are used to form the face of a character or the landscape of an environment in an animated film, the artists must take great care in determining which shapes will effectively portray the personality and emotion necessary to tell the visual narrative. Take, for example, the degree of angularity, or the lack of angularity, in a character's face. According to Simpson and Schmitt, the more angular the shape, the more "conflict, dynamism, and masculinity" it emits, whereas a rounded shape emanates calm and "harmony" (90). In Disney's *Aladdin* (1992), the scheming villain, Jafar, has a very gaunt face, complete with jutting cheekbones, a hooked nose, angled eyebrows, and a sharply curling smile. In contrast, Russell, the enthusiastic boy scout from Pixar's *Up* (2009), has very few angular features. Instead he has a round face, with chubby cheeks, a button nose, softly arched eyebrows, and large, circular ears. In these two examples of character design, it becomes clear how the artists used specific shapes to support the personality of the characters and better tell the visual narrative.

Through this type of close study, the way certain shape types emit a personality can be better understood, but how does the facial structure of an animated character portray a certain behavior as a whole? The answer to this question is based less on artistic elements and more on stereotypes created by society. These stereotypes are the lingering beliefs of bygone times when it was common to judge the personality of someone based on their rank in society, their astrological signs, and, yes, their facial features.

According to John Liggett's book, *The Human Face*, physiognomy (the judgment of the nature of a person according to their features) has been around since biblical times and was employed by some of greatest intellectuals of ancient Greece, including Pythagoras, Plato, and Socrates. They all believed that a person's intelligence and temperament could be read in their facial features. Over the centuries, these beliefs were only increased by the use of scientific measurements and other such nonsense, until they were finally rejected as fallacy in the late 1800s (181). However, the stereotypes associated with certain features linger on to this today and are even used in character design in animated film, which will be explained shortly.

In his book, Liggett writes about arguably the most renowned and outspoken physiognomists, Johann Kaspar Lavater of Zürich. Born in 1741, Lavater was a pastor and a skilled poet and artist. He employed his drawing skills to meticulously record facial features of people he saw, which he would later study. Eventually he published a well received book, which included his findings and was illustrated with an assortment of his drawings (188). Many of these supposed discoveries generally stated that attractive features expressed intelligence and high morals, while less than attractive features, or even deformities, were linked to stupidity and villainy. Of course, such results were highly biased and incorrect, but they have managed to last through the ages.

Returning now to the two previously examined characters, one can see how many of Lavater's concepts of physiognomy may be used by animating artists. For example, the overall physical appearance of the character of Jafar is rather unpleasant. He may even be considered downright ugly when compared to the handsome hero of the story, Aladdin. In fact, Jafar's face holds many similarities to one of Lavater's drawings, which he described as "the image of blood-

thirsty cruelty; unfeeling, without a trait of humanity; want of wisdom" (193). Since Jafar is the cold-hearted, power-hungry villain of the story, this description fits him and his features very well.

By comparing the animated character of Russell to another similarly featured drawing of Lavater's, an equally accurate description is given. Lavater writes that his drawing of an attractive, rounded featured young man is "full of youthful simplicity, innocence, good nature and good sense" (195). This portrayal easily applies to the warm-hearted character of Russell. Through these comparisons with Jafar and Russell, it can be concluded that personalities imbedded by animating artists into the facial features of characters are a combination of well employed shapes and the use of physiognomically influenced stereotypes. The clever use of both of these methods can transform what could otherwise be merely computer codes into characters with believable, if partially subliminal, personalities. As John Lassiter explains in the documentary *The Pixar Story*, "No one is thinking, 'well, this is just a cartoon. It's just a bunch of pencil drawings on paper or computer data.' No, these characters are alive. They are real." Such well crafted personalities and characters can carry the story of a digital, visual narrative.

Color:

Now let us turn to the influence of color in visual storytelling. Color has a far more powerful effect on the emotions of viewers than shape. This is due to the instinctive and arguably evolutionary nature of color perception. It is widely believed that human beings developed a wider range of color sensitivity than most animals in order to survive. Natural selection, if you will. Being able to tell the difference between a poisonous cobalt berry and a scrumptious indigo berry is certainly a handy ability. Over time, the human mind attached certain psychological

reactions to specific colors, or UV wavelengths. In Faber Birren's book, *Color Psychology and Color Therapy*, he explains how the different frequencies of wavelengths in the color spectrum result in different responses in the human brain. "Light striking the eye sets up reactions which spread throughout the organism. There may be excitation or depression, a quickening of the nervous response or an effect of tranquility. Impression of pleasure or displeasure may be less associated with spiritual and aesthetic qualities than with the reaction of the brain and, indeed, the entire organism." (139)

Birren delves even deeper by writing that the mental and physical parts of humans are so closely linked that they easily affect one another, and color can play a subtle role in influencing the mental and therefore the physical reactions of viewers (141). The use of color as a means of manipulation has long been employed in advertising and marketing. In fact, the power of color is so valued that some companies have even gone to the lengths of patenting them, as is the case with the famous Coca Cola red.

Color can also be put to use in animated film by helping to direct the emotions of viewers to flow with the story. Because animators can control every pixel of color displayed on screen, using color to propel the visual narrative is quite feasible. Also, since animated stories are most often fictional and tend to feature fantastical imagery, the animators have some freedom with the amount and intensity of the colors they use.

However, knowing the right colors to use can still be tricky. In addition to understanding the way colors influence viewers psychologically, animators must also be aware of cultural symbolism of colors, which can also affect how they are viewed and felt. In general, the psychological reaction to colors depends on their frequency. The lower the frequency of the

wavelengths, the warmer and more energetic the color appears. In contrast, higher frequency colors are cooler and more calming. Now consider how red, a warm and energetic color, is also symbolically linked with blood and death as well as romance and love. Suddenly, a single color has multiple contradictory emotional responses. Art and film theorist, Rudolf Arnheim, notes that humans also relate colors with the way they are displayed in nature. As the color of water and the sky, blue is often experienced as a soothing color. Green relates to life and vegetation. ("The Expression and Composition of Color" 349) Things get even more complicated when the value, or lightness and darkness, of a color comes into play.

When a single color possesses so many conflicting emotions and meanings, it can certainly become difficult to use color as a means of clarifying a story. In the end, it is up to the skill of the animator to sift through the jumbled color influences to the find the precise blend necessary to procure the right emotion from viewers. Such a skill is developed through careful study of color theory, observation of color in the natural world, and a good deal of experimentation.

In an animated film, the visual element that is arguably most dependent on color is the environment or set design. Locations are often used as an outward expression of the characters themselves, so by giving a mood to a certain location through clever use of color, animators can help the viewer better understand the emotions of the characters, and in turn, the direction of the story.

For example in the animated film, *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), the protagonist, Belle, is a sweet, smart, but odd girl living on the outskirts of a little French village with her widower father, who is an inventor. In the opening scene, Belle leaves her home for the village, and the

viewer gets a clear glimpse of her house. The colors of her home are mainly warm and high in value, with burnt orange shingles, crème colored walls, a red brick chimney, and touches of spring green on the window panes and shutters. The land surrounding the house is filled with yellowed grass and foliage turning from green to orange, which indicates mild temperature as Summer fades to Fall, and the sky is a pale yellow, which hints at a warm morning. Most of these colors are naturalistic, but they are tweaked ever so slightly to be oversaturated and bright. Overall the blend of colors are lively and inviting, which reflects both Belle and her father's personality as well and the comfortable mood that permeates their happy, but, as Belle notes early in the film, rather uneventful, lives.

In stark contrast, the castle in which the cursed Beast dwells possesses much cooler, darker colors. In the story, Belle's father first stumbles upon the castle after he has become lost in the woods and chased by wolves. The black silhouettes of the twisted trees part to reveal the castle. Its stone walls are a foreboding bluish grey, and the tiles roofs are a dusty, aged brown. The widows are all black, forming the illusion of deep, unfriendly eyes. The sky is depicted as cloudy and dark blue, which fits the time of night as well as creepiness of the castle. All of these colors combine to form a cold and unwelcoming atmosphere, which mirrors the personality of the Beast, at least at first. As the story progresses, however, and the Beast warms up to Belle, the colors used throughout the castle gradually grow brighter and richer, indicating the developing romance between the two.

Through these comparisons of the homes of Belle and the Beast, it can be observed that the emotions inserted by animating artists into the environments through the meticulous use of

color can indeed help further the visual narrative of an animation in subtle, yet highly effective way.

In conclusion, the perception that animated films are not a quality form of storytelling should certainly be reconsidered. As we have discussed, the artistic elements within animation, specifically shape and color, provide a visual means of storytelling, much like descriptive writing supports literature. Morris Beja clearly explains the relationship between these two art forms in his book "*Film and Literature.*"

> "...for some reason we act as if twentieth century literature is inexplicably confined to poems, plays, and novels. Moreover, if we go further back...we will include works that are not written or printed: everyone agrees that the Homeric epics are literature, yet it was not until centuries after they were composed that anyone ever wrote them down. Had movies somehow existed in ancient Greece, or during the Renaissance, we would surely now be studying them as works of literature." (53)

Animation should not be disregarded as form of narrative simply because it is a recent invention of the digital age. Nor should it be shrugged off as are a juvenile or low art, due to the fact that it provides a group experience. Instead, it should be valued as the artistic and fully capable narrative form that it is. Its value as an acceptable means of storytelling should not only be understood, but appreciated both by literary critics and general viewers alike. After all, who doesn't love a good story?

III. Experimentation:Creative Research

(Fig. 1) Here, one can see how tinkering with the artistic element of shape within a single character's face can effect the personality being portrayed. The most obvious change is in the amount of angularity present in each face. In this example, we can see how the rounder face appears calmer, while the sharper face appears more alert. The mixed face contains a balance of angular and round shapes, and, therefore, a more average personality.

(Fig. 2) The character with balance of angular and rounded features, will likely have a determined, but kind personality, whereas the round-faced character will support sweet and passive personality. The third version of the female character appears to possess a more energetic, and possibly more aggressive, personality simply because of the sharp diagonals making up her face.

(Fig. 3) Shape has as much influence over the personality of a figure as it does the face. The intense angularity in this figure of a wizard increases the amount of energy portrayed in his personality. But since he is an older fellow, that feeling of energy is not seen as physical, but is instead transferred into the depiction of his magic, thus making his power part of his personality.

(Fig. 4) Now let's examine differently shaped characters interacting in a scene. The combination of angularity and roundness in these characters, along with the exaggeration of proportions, help tell the story. From the sharp angles, a feeling of tension and aggression is amplified, but the roundness and odd proportions give it a humorous quality. In short, the roundness is balancing out the sharpness, leaving the viewer with a funny and adorable scene.

(Fig. 5) After some close observations, it becomes apparent that shapes can be used in infinite combinations to form personalities.

(Fig. 6) Although the creation of such personalities has its challenges, it can also certainly be an engaging and enjoyable experience for the artist.

As discussed earlier, shapes are not the only factors that can shape a character's personality. Color is also a significant contributer to the emotion of a scene, particularly in environment design.

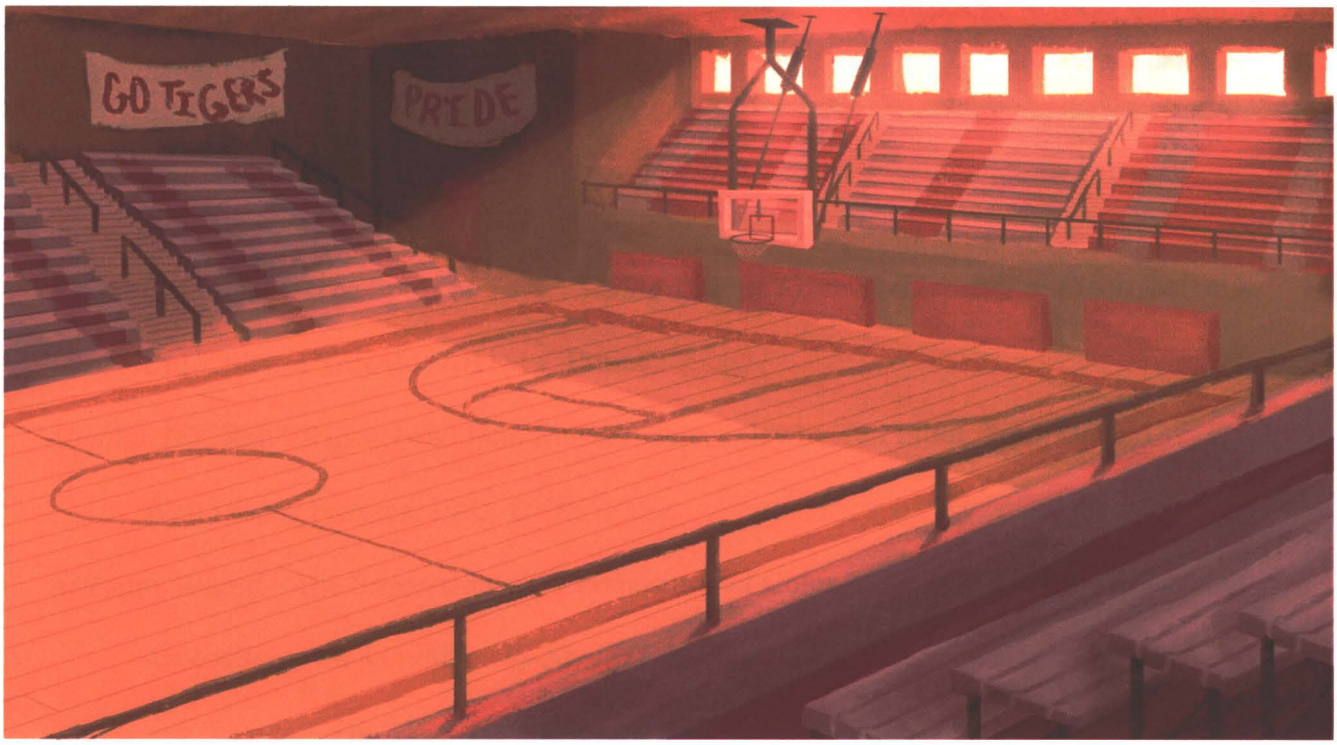
(Fig. 7) This illustration uses colors that are fairly true to those of a real life sunset in the African Savannah. The warm colors of yellow and orange capture the heat of the ending day, as well as the likely dryness of the air. However, these colors, though realistic, are not really swaying the audience to feel any particular emotion.

(Fig. 8 and 9) In contrast the use of red in the left depiction of the environment tells the same story with a greater sense of danger and excitement. The tension of the imminent hunt is heightened.
The lack of color can also be influential. The lack of vibrant values in this depiction lessens the energy level and creates a more somber mood. Perhaps this version of the story focuses on the approaching death of the zebra.

(Fig. 10) The colors in this forested environment are rather dark and muted, which adds a sense of mystery and even foreboding to the scene. Viewers may find themselves wondering what the deer is looking at and if it is dangerous.

(Fig. 11 and 12) However, when the deep browns are exchanged for vibrant greens, the entire feeling of the environment changes. Suddenly, the forest is filled with energy and life. Colors can also indicate the time of day, but in the case of the illustration on the right, the blues and purples do more than show that it is night. The provide as soothing and even mystical aura to the forest.

(Fig. 13,14, and 15) The neutral tones in these examples hardly provide neutral emotion to viewers. The subtle amounts of yellow, red, and blue can shift the feeling of the desert from plain and empty, to desolate and harsh, to cold and mournful.



(Fig. 16, 17, and 18) The warm values in the top illustration of the gymnasium are inviting and seem to contain remnants of the energy of a recent game.
The colors in lower left illustration, however, reveal a dusty and aged gym, where any past victory is merely a distant memory. The colors themselves evoke a feeling of nostalgia.
The lower right illustration at first appears to simply depict a gym at night, but the cool hues can also give a sense of spookiness. Perhaps, this gym is haunted by the ghost of an old athlete? It is in this way that colors can support a visual narrative.

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Author Biography

Stevie Dutson was born in Las Vegas, Nevada, but grew up in a small, charming town in Southern Utah. Although she was an avid reader and student in elementary school, her true passion was in art, as the doodle-filled borders of her homework assignments would attest. During high school she participated in many organizations such as National Honors Society, Upward Bound, FFA, orchestra, choir, Shakespeare team, book club, and, of course, art club, in which she served two years as president.

She graduated from Hurricane High School in 2010 as visual arts Sterling Scholar and embarked on her college career. After attending Dixie State College for a year and obtaining her Associate of Arts, she transferred to Utah State University to pursue a BFA. She is currently a graphic design major and an art history minor. While at USU, she has had the privilege of participating in several art exhibits as well as a summer study abroad trip to Eastern Europe. She will be graduating in the spring of 2013.

After graduation, she plans on gaining employment at a design firm or an animation studio. In doing so, she hopes to fight for creativity and effective communication and rid the world of misused fonts. After gaining plenty of experience in the field, she looks forward to eventually returning to school to earn her MFA and teaching design.